



## SPIRITUAL INSIGHTS for Therapists and Other Healers

### ABANDONMENT AND SURRENDER by the Rev. N. Graham Standish, PhD, MSW, MDiv, MA

*A bi-monthly series of reflections to help therapists and other healers integrate spirituality into their practice by introducing them to foundational spiritual themes and topics that aren't commonly taught in psychotherapy. These are rooted in Graham's 30+ years of advanced spiritual study, teaching, pastoring, and serving as a spiritual director.*

#### Reflection

One of the most difficult spiritual endeavors to engage in, and especially help others open to, is the practice of deeply *surrendering our lives to God*, however we know God. This surrender goes against so much of how most people have been raised to live their lives. They've been raised in a culture that preaches messages of self-reliance, pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, constantly striving to achieve more, and keeping our struggles silent and personal. How do any of us surrender to God when we're supposed to be in charge of our own lives?

This spirit of self-reliance also creates an internal struggle when we do turn to God, especially as our struggles become overwhelming. Often what we do is end up asking God to surrender to us, to answer our prayers the way we decide is best, and to do what's best for us according to our own desires and determinations. We're like the atheist on a cliff:

An atheist once visited the Grand Canyon, spending a wonderful day hiking alone along its crest. Admiring a particularly beautiful view, a sudden wind gust pushed him over the edge. Hurling downward into the abyss, he flailed away, trying to grasp anything that might save him from certain death. As the ground rushed upward to meet him, he managed to grab ahold of a lone branch jutting out of the cliff wall. Suspended 200 feet from the top and 300 from the bottom, he tried to calm his heart and breathing so he could assess his situation.

He couldn't climb up. He couldn't climb down. It was hopeless. He was desperate. He screamed for help for over an hour, but only the wind echoed back. In desperation he shouted: "God! Are you out there? Help me! If you're there and save me, I'll do anything you ask!" He heard nothing but the sound of the canyon breeze sweeping across the cliff wall. "God! You're the only one who can save me. Help me, and I'll do whatever you want." Again, nothing but wind and silence.

Despite feeling foolish he called once more, but more intensely. He was about to give up all hope when he heard a thundering voice: "Sure, sure, that's what they all say." "God? Is that you? I mean it, I'll do anything you ask!" he replied. "Are you sure?" God asked. "Yes... anything!"

God said, "Okay, I'll save you, but you must do exactly what I say." "Of course," the man replied. "You know I'll do it. I'll become a Christian. I'll help the poor. I'll go to church every Sunday." God gently replied, "Okay, here's what I want you to do. Let go of the branch."

The man reflected for a while, looked around and shouted, "Is there anybody else out there?"

This story captures how hard surrendering and abandoning ourselves to God, to the Divine, truly is. So many questions: *What if there really isn't a God? What if we surrender and God doesn't respond? If I surrender, how will I know if God is responding? What will happen to my life if I surrender? Will I have to give up my life, my livelihood, my family, my ambitions, my dreams, my passions?* Or, as an initially agnostic member of a church I led (who eventually became a pastor herself) said, "What if I surrender and God calls me to Calcutta? I don't want to go to Calcutta." I responded, "Trust me, if God calls you there, God will give you a passion for it, but I don't think Calcutta's in God's plans for you."



We can teach people all the spiritual practices we want, from meditation to mindfulness to gratitude to reflection to discernment. But if they aren't accompanied by some level of abandonment to the Divine, they become practices that we tried at some point but either didn't get much out of or had a hard time sticking with.

What does it mean for people to abandon and surrender to God? It certainly requires a level of spiritual maturity that many, if not most, people don't have. The reality is that true abandonment is never complete. It's phased. The key is taking that first step of offering our lives to God, working on trusting God, and then deepening our surrender over time. Surrender also doesn't mean no longer engaging in real life. We still work, play, raise families, and do whatever life calls on us to do, *and we still make many mistakes*. Surrendering to God in the midst of real life simply means creating the conditions where we live a kind of a shared life with God rather than a reclusive, utopian one.

I've often suggested the following while working with people as their spiritual director: 1) *Start with a simple, sincere, honest prayer of giving our lives to God, while also sharing our fear and reluctance to trust God.* 2) *Resist the urge to look for proof that God has accepted and responded to our surrender.* Trust that God is responding in ways we can't sense. 3) *Make the surrender a regular part of our prayer, while also gently admitting our struggles with it* 4) *Continue looking for ways to deepen trust and to be more intentionally aware of God's presence.*

Guiding the people we work with in this can be a bit fraught in the same way emphasizing healing prayer can be. People want tangible, quick results, while the process of surrendering is a slow, uneven process. There's simply no way, other than experience over time, to demonstrate the benefits. So as we work with others to consider this kind of surrender, we need to be cautious, careful, and gentle with them so that we're not pushing them into something that they simply aren't ready for spiritually, mentally, or emotionally. We have to be adamantly careful about not trying to convert our clients. Instead, we are offering them a spiritual option that aids their therapy.

## Ideas for Intervention

How do we do help people live more in the present moment? Several thoughts:

- *Explore with your clients what facets of their lives make it hard not only to trust God, but to trust anyone, and how that plays out in their resistance to God's presence in their lives.*
- *Explore with your clients times when it's seemed as though they've given a situation over to God and what their experiences were afterwards, identifying possible lessons they can learn from.*

**Prayer** (take a moment of quiet centering, then read the prayer)

*Gracious God, I want so much for **you** to surrender yourself to **me**, to make me the center of your will, but that's not the way it works, is it? You call us to abandon ourselves to you so that we can discover how you are above all and in all and through all. It's only as we surrender to you that we fully discover your beauty, grace, love, and light in and through us. So help us to give ourselves to you, especially whenever we're tempted to separate ourselves from you. Amen.*